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Immanent Practice

The great feast of knowledge

Picture the scene: A colossal hall packed full of massive wooden rectangular tables, around which are sitting, standing, pacing, gesticulating the motliest throng of human beings you can imagine. Wealthy and poor, well-dressed and ragged, smart and stupid, saints and monsters, the ruined and the saved; at turns pensive, polite, inflamed, and furious, merging, submerging, coalescing, colliding in excited anticipation. The hall reverberates with the raucous roar of booming voices. The Great Feast of Knowledge is at hand! The feast is a place where ideas—concepts, beliefs, myths, truths, fantasies, hopes and dreams—are subjected to a ravaging ordeal; they are: exalted, weaponized, hunted down, beaten, contested, defended, slaughtered, thrown into the fire, served up, desecrated, devoured. This feast has been unfolding since the first primitive grunts of human communication. Though refined through the centuries, the feast is still permeated by the most primeval dual need of *homo sapiens* ape: security and belonging. At the imposing entrance stands a guard. His task is to collect the weapons from the grand disciplinary forces seeking entrance to the feast. Philosophy, History, Physics, Literature, Law—everyone may enter, but first shorn of sword and insignia. Look! Buddhism is arriving, arrayed with its battery of concepts, inexhaustible treasures illuminating the darkness of the world; its *bodhisattva* field marshals armed with seductively confident arguments; its Buddha, glowing with the sovereign nimbus of the thaumaturge. Stripped down, deprived of their regency, institutionally indigent, the Buddhist agents enter the hall indistinguishable from everyone else. They take their seats amid the chaotic swarm. The struggle begins.

The Western Buddhist *no!* that I supposed, rightly or wrongly, at the end of the previous chapter, should not be passed over too quickly. I also mentioned there the endless bickering (Nietzsche's "war"?) that typically characterizes

incommensurable communities of thought. Almost invariably, what follows this bickering is the end of dialogue, each party retreating back into the secure warm bosom of its community. If my critique is to have any effect beyond a self-selected group of already critical-minded readers, it is crucial that it offer a way through this quagmire. The trick, of course, is that the way proposed be agreed on by all parties. That rarely happens in real life. The trope of The Great Feast of Knowledge, however, is intended as a way forward *in thought* at least. I will say more in a moment about that idea specifically. First, some exploration of the very idea of incommensurability and how it might, paradoxically, enable even the most recalcitrant reader's reception of this critique.

As Laruelle claims for non-philosophy, I claim for the present book, and for non-buddhism specifically, namely, that it offers "thought for [Western Buddhism], but which [Western Buddhism] does not want, and which it resists *de jure*." Of course it resists! This critique is claiming, after all that Western Buddhism currently has more in common with a "psychological trick" than with a "science." I acknowledge the necessity of this resistance even though, as I have emphasized throughout this book, Western Buddhism (Buddhism, x-buddhism, Mindfulness, Zen) *fashions itself* as something like a rigorous science. Still, to entertain the possibility that it "relies on this thought to make something other than a simple transcendental illusion which is ignorant of itself" is a lot to ask a fan of Western Buddhism. This is true even though I further claim that this thought aims to relate to Western Buddhism as a "new type of 'object,'" one which Buddhism itself has perhaps concealed from us, and "which can do so without destroying [Buddhism] through positivism."¹ There seems to be some element in our respective approaches that marks as adversarial this x-buddhism/non-buddhism encounter. To leave it at that, however, would be a grave mistake, one that undermines the very intent of my critique. It would be equally unproductive to leave the seemingly intractable issue of incommensurability unaddressed. The Polish microbiologist Ludwik Fleck calls these differing approaches *thought styles*. To psychoanalyze our feast participants for a moment, we might say that their respective thought style is a mere *symptom*, a manifest sign of an underlying identification; it marks the place—the "(w)hole" of discourse—that the participant has "fallen into." A person's thought style thus reveals his or her subscription to a program of knowledge. More specifically, Fleck defines a thought style as "the readiness for directed perception and appropriate assimilation of what has been perceived."² He explains that what directs perception and determines appropriate assimilation is the particular *thought collective* that produces a thought style. But first, I should mention the

role that *mood* plays in the allure of ideas. Although Fleck is taking the natural sciences as his example of the genesis and development of knowledge, anyone referring to religious material such as Buddhism should recognize the qualities of this “mood.”

[The mood] is expressed as a common *reverence* for an ideal; in the *belief* that what is being revered can be achieved only in the distant, perhaps infinitely distant future; in the *glorification* of dedicating oneself to its service; in a definite *hero worship* and a distinct *tradition*.³

Significantly, the symptomatic nature of a thought style ensures that the interlocutor employs it reflexively. This reflexivity, in fact, marks the successful subjectivization of the person within a particular ideological apparatus; or, in Laruelle’s terms, it is indicative of the force of decision in assuming a World. It is this apparatus that Fleck refers to as a *thought collective*. A committed Western Buddhist practitioner is called to, is made to desire, Buddhism as a system of knowledge on hearing the promise of its powers. But that practitioner must then spend time within the institutional structure that encodes the master’s knowledge, being formed as the “special ‘carrier,’” as the embodiment, of that knowledge via the thought style of the collective.

A “thought collective” [is] a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction ... The individual within the collective is never, or hardly ever, conscious of the prevailing thought style, which almost always exerts an absolutely compulsive force upon his thinking and with which it is not possible to be at variance.⁴

It is this tendency toward style invariance combined with institutionally reinforced personal identity formation that foreshadows incommensurability. An *astronomer* might listen “with respect” (as we like to believe) as her *astrologer* interlocutor explains the impact of Venus’s rising in Gemini on the love life of earthlings, but she won’t be buying any of it. Conversely, the astrologer, on hearing from the astronomer that Venus’s atmosphere consists of 96 percent carbon dioxide, 3.5 percent nitrogen, and less than 1 percent of carbon monoxide, argon, sulfur dioxide, and water vapor, might, while feigning interest, secretly believe his interlocutor to be “trapped in the intellect,” and thus wholly missing the point. Both interlocutors are “experts on Venus.” But to each, the other’s thought style, and by extension institutional thought collective, is deeply misguided, even foolish. The institutional inculcation that is necessary for the formation of the practitioner simultaneously limits the possibility of his or her thought style.

Because it belongs to a community, the thought style of the collective undergoes social reinforcement ... It constrains the individual by determining "what can be thought in no other way."⁵

At The Great Feast of Knowledge, Western Buddhism must enter into dialogue with disparate thought collectives. Imagine, for example, the conversation between agents of, say, Biology and Buddhism on the necessity of lust/*lobha* for human existence, for reproduction and perpetuation of the species, for instance. Such an encounter, such a fusion, creates a new thought collective, however fleeting and begrudged. For, a nonnegotiable premise of The Great Feast of Knowledge is that all disciplines *think*. At the feast, *thought circulates freely*. Among other consequences, this feature accounts for the possibility of what we all know to be true of systems of thought, even the most sacrosanct: they change. Hence, as Fleck says, a "fundamental phenomenon of epistemology is the *fact* that the circulation of thought is always related, in principle to its transformation."⁶

So, our reflection on incommensurability has a hint of promise. But, as the rowdy medieval image of the feast is meant to convey, it is a promise that carries with it a certain threat of conceptual anarchy. For who can say what might be bred in the dregs of thought's circulation? Who can say whether the trajectory of "transformation" might not be mutilation, defacement, undesired mutation, perversion? Yet, as the great champion of the unbridled anarchy of thought, Paul Feyerabend, insists, perhaps knowledge absolutely *depends on* the communal sounding of discordant local knowledges:

Knowledge ... is not a series of self-consistent theories that converges toward an ideal view; it is not a gradual approach to the truth. It is rather an ever increasing *ocean of mutually incompatible (and perhaps even incommensurable) alternatives*, each single theory, each fairy tale, each myth that is part of the collection forcing others into greater articulation and all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of our consciousness.⁷

But before we celebrate our escape from the morass of incommensurability, Feyerabend reminds us that this turbulent ocean of knowledge is populated not only by the "lucubrations of experts" but also by "ancient and modern prejudices ... and the fantasies of cranks."⁸ How can we determine the difference? By what criterion can we judge?

To answer this question, we have to turn once again to the idea of the Real.

Thinking from the Real-One

Recall Kafka's figure standing before the law. The law is nowhere to be seen or heard or otherwise apprehended by the senses. Neither is it an invisible mystical force available only to nonsensorial intuition. Neither is it the product of reason or the concoction of superstition. The law is real but it does not exist. The man from the country is evidence of that conundrum because he is its effect; he is a lived instance of the law's real authority. Seeking entrance to the law, the man is compelled by the law to stand before the law. With the devotion of a saint, he endures in order to behold the face *of* the law, to gain liberating insight *into* the law. But since there never has been an outside to the law, such a relationship is simply not possible. So, he waits in vain. To stand thus is to stand *already*, it is to have *always* stood, before the face of the law.⁹

It is the same for the agents who submit themselves to unarming at the door to the feast. The decimation of their conceptual arsenal *was already the case*. The stripping of their power regalia *had already occurred*. The depotentializing of their charisma took effect *ab aeterno*. The Great Feast of Knowledge is where *World's* collide. The background to this struggle, though, has always been and will always be *the world*, the "black universe," itself. Seeking a secure place on which to stand, yearning for membership in a community of Wisdom, "the human gropes in the World," says Laruelle, but "the World floats in the Universe, powerless to touch its borders." Incommensurability, the ring of dissonant siren songs, the violent commotion of the multitude defending cherished views, the heart strings' refusal to be plucked by the soul's eternal vibrato—this is all evidence of the good news:

Humans toil the Earth, live in the World, think according to the Universe.

The Earth is our ground, the World our neighbor, the Universe our secret.

We already know that we, us human beings, derive our material sustenance from the earth. We have been reminded by thinkers like Marx, Althusser, Nietzsche, and Laruelle that in inhabiting a specific World we reify community and forge identity. Now, we are faced with the proposition that our thinking is somehow properly bound to "the Universe." What can this mean? In the terms of Kafka's fable, we said that "the law" is the cause of the effects we witnessed. We can now say that that is because "the law" determined, in the last instance, the man from the country's *thinking*. The two, cause and effect, the law and the thinking, are indistinguishable. And yet, the law possesses no actual content, much less

literal being (hence my use of scare quotes). Yet, as I hope to show, it still makes sense to say that “it” has force, that it exerts an influence. Its influence, moreover, is exerted unilaterally, from its side only. Most significantly, perhaps, the law is wholly foreclosed to anyone who would enter. It inheres solely within itself, unmixed with foreign objects and desires, undivided by dueling disciples and decisions, for “the Universe is not reflected in another universe.”¹⁰

These statements are from one of Laruelle’s most experimental texts, “On the Black Universe.” Elsewhere, he confesses that he is practicing a “poetry of thought.”¹¹ However obliquely and experimentally, it is clear, though, that he is speaking about his most important topic: “the One.” Synonymous with “the Real,” the One is equally the pivot on which the present critique turns. While, believe it or not, Laruelle’s strange text may, in the end, be our surest guide to the One, we will have to wind our way along a sturdier path. For, as the cosmic imagery and the whisper of a “secret” should amply warn us, we are treading perilous terrain. We have already seen how suddenly the road to science can turn toward the New Age desert; how suddenly an organon of knowledge can mutate into a weapon of ideology; how suddenly a perspicuous human insight can morph into an hallucinated vision. We must tread carefully.

Before setting out, it might be of help to mention briefly that it is precisely this danger that accounts for the character of the approach I have been employing. Some readers may be scratching their heads at Laruelle’s method, its difficulty and abstraction, its reluctance to engage specific examples from the history of philosophy, its weird vocabulary. I have been culling Laruelle with awareness of the fact that my readers are accustomed to a much more reader-friendly Western Buddhist discourse. I am even more acutely aware of the close correspondence between the spirit of this critique and that of Buddhism itself. The difficulties inherent in borrowing from Laruelle are unavoidable because they arise from the dire and absolute necessity of not instituting yet another iteration of x-buddhism, much less another idealist mirage in the New Age desert. The history of Buddhism is brimming with examples of internecine struggles for dominance. *Pace* the apostles of “One Dharma,” the history of Buddhism down to the present day has largely been the history of institutional and doctrinal competition. Although I claim that the present critique is of a fundamentally different genre than, say, reform literature, I also fully expect most readers to resist that claim. In fact, in the spirit of The Great Feast of Knowledge and Paul Feyerabend’s anarchy of ideas and Ludwik Fleck’s incommensurability of thought styles, I welcome such resistance. The greater danger lies in a certain kind of *acceptance*. Is it not obvious that we *do* possess the mighty, avenging instinct to spin yarns about another

world, as Nietzsche told us about earlier? The incessancy and psychological urgency of our yarn-spinning, so often to our own detriment, means that even non-philosophy or non-buddhism is ripe for insertion into the meaning void. The danger, of course, is that the reader fashions from this material new forms of decision, sufficiency, and hallucination. Hopefully, the virtue of my Laruellean borrowings, however intricate, is that they serve to limit this danger.

We can begin our journey toward the One by offering this provocative paraphrase of Anthony Paul Smith: *resistance* to the One is how x-buddhism produces itself. But this quintessentially x-buddhist “act can only be called resistance because it is always only a relative negation.” That is, it is only a precarious *resistance to* and never an accomplished *negation of* the One or the Real. Smith says further:

[Buddhism’s] attempt to negate the indifference of the Real by attempting to englobe or encompass it with transcendent names like [The Dharma or emptiness or dependent origination, etc.] never actually absolutely negates the Real or the One. It is thus only constituted as resistance to the foreclosed Real’s unrepresentability.¹²

This statement, of course, leaves unsaid just what this foreclosed and unrepresentable Real *is*, but it still contains essential information. There is something about engaging in this very practice of naming that implicates x-buddhism in a certain kind of operation. We saw in the previous section how this operation works. What x-buddhism names pertains to the ostensible constituents of reality (personhood, consciousness, causality, matter, etc.). The pertinence of its names is phenomenologically verifiable; for the naming, being a naming of the world, is a purely immanent practice. However, in order to establish an incontrovertible and unitary sufficiency for this naming as uniquely *x-buddhist*, it must be grounded in another name—an exclusively x-buddhist name—that is transcendent to the empirical naming. If it is not thus externally grounded, as the guests at The Great Feast of Knowledge remind our Buddhist agents, Western Buddhism must be said to be engaging in a completely different kind of operation than it says it is; namely, that of a nondecisional science-thought or of an insufficient non-buddhism. Such an operation requires no transcendently englobabling operator, such as The Dharma. With the cancellation of this operator’s warrant, resistance ceases. For, it never entailed resistance *to* the Real because x-buddhism fashions itself as precisely an organon *of* the Real. Rather, it evidenced a refusal to accept the fact that the Real cannot be articulated and dominated—englobed—within x-buddhism’s system of

representation. Recall that the man from the country wholly accepts “the law.” That acceptance is what hails him to the impassable portal. Catalyzed by his idealized vision of the law, he acts and thinks as he does, vainly hoping and scheming and waiting. As long as the man holds that vision, named “the law,” to constitute the law’s reality, he is incapable of any other response. What he is thereby resisting, however, is the *foreclosure* of the law to any sort of “entry.” That which has received the name of the law is as indifferent to this naming as it is to the man’s vision and even less so to his longing. Until he realizes this facet of the law, he remains the interpellated subject of the ideological vision, and not that of what he so desires. Like the identity of an individual, the identity of a system of thought pivots on one’s response to the Real’s foreclosure. Acceptance engenders a (materialist) science-thought and science (in Laruelle’s sense) while resistance engenders (idealist) decision and a hallucinated World. It is in this manner that resistance to the One or the Real is productive.

Of what would *nonresistance* to the Real be productive? What, in other words, would it mean to think *with* the Real or *from* the One? When Buddhism expounds on emptiness, no-self, dependent origination, The Dharma, and so on, it is *thinking the Real*. It is doing so, of course, by thinking *toward* the Real:

Buddhism → the Real

Thinking in this direction is what constitutes Buddhism as the grand system of human enlightenment that it is. It, better than any other form of thought, provides us with the terms that name absolutely exigent and categorically determinate principles of existence. That, at least, is Buddhism’s major, sine qua non, postulate. Moreover, this naming, or more precisely the amphiboly ensuing from its naming, is what constitutes Buddhism’s sufficiency. With Buddhist first names in place of the non-philosophical One, the formula looks like this, for example:

Buddhism → emptiness

Buddhism → ultimate reality

Buddhism → The Dharma

Unlike art and literary fiction, Buddhism does not purport to be offering aesthetic devices or creative metaphors for understanding the Real. Like a science, it claims to give us phenomenologically exact, ideologically unencumbered, access not only to the vault of the Real, but to the Real in the last instance. Emptiness, that is to say, is *ultimately* real. This means that it is real such that all Buddhist postulates are effectively true by virtue of this Real, of emptiness, to which they

are but faithful protectors. Buddhism thus positions itself as nothing less than an organon of the Real; or, in the terms of its self-presentation, than as a means for understanding the real conditions of, and overcoming and ending, the cycle of *dukkha*. With my treatment of decision, I hope to have shown that Buddhism, contrary to this self-presentation, perpetually gives us Buddhism (auto-donation) and produces more Buddhism (auto-position). The result of these two features of Buddhism is that the very postulates that are intended to enlighten us to the truth of emptiness instead are injected *into* emptiness, mixed with emptiness, and confused for emptiness, or whatever other first name Buddhism might offer. (In a similar move in the history of ideas, if in a somewhat different register, the deaf and mute black universe becomes the space of astrological causality, the abode of heaven, the beautiful exteriorization of the soul, and so on.) We can graph this fecund circular mixing as follows:

Buddhism $\Leftrightarrow$ x¹-buddhism $\Leftrightarrow$ x²-buddhism $\Leftrightarrow$ x³-buddhism $\Leftrightarrow$ the Real

The solution to cancelling this circularity is simultaneously the realization of the Buddhist desire for the Real. Again, this is good news. It requires only one modification in Buddhism's operation, namely, the removal of its sufficiency postulate. The removal of this single postulate, of course, produces a significant mutation. It metamorphosizes x-buddhism (Buddhism, Western Buddhism, Ordinary Mind Zen, Mindfulness, Vajrayana, etc.) into non-buddhism. We can see this point more clearly by considering how, in this regard, non-buddhism is akin to non-Euclidean geometry.¹³ Briefly, the difference between Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry lies in the behavior of a line in space. Euclid's fifth postulate axiomatically assumes parallelism. In upholding this postulate, along with the other four, Euclideans limit the field of possible forms. Rejecting this single postulate, non-Euclidean geometry enables radically different possibilities, such as elliptical and hyperbolic curvature. Significantly, non-Euclideans preserve all of Euclidean geometry except that single postulate. Similarly, by removing the postulate of sufficiency, non-buddhism radically extends the formal possibilities of Buddhism without negating it as such. (This point will be revisited in Part 3.) The first and most far-reaching result of this removal is in Buddhism's relation to the Real, which can now be graphed as:

Buddhism $\Leftarrow$ the Real

Or, with Buddhist first names:

Buddhism $\Leftarrow$ emptiness (dependent origination, thusness, etc.)

Rather than enabling an intervention into the Real, rather than producing knowledge of it, buddhistic naming and decision has “coagulated, condensed, and refolded the [buddhistic] space in on itself, encumbering it and separating it from its force.”¹⁴ The removal of its encumbering necessity to provide sufficient Wisdom for humanity frees Buddhism to manifest its force as, for instance, potentially valuable human cultural material. Paradoxically, however, it can do so only by forfeiting its claim on the Real. We saw above that Buddhism does not resist the Real per se. What it resists is the “foreclosed Real’s unrepresentability.” As the graph indicates, the Real, like Kafka’s law, is closed (/) to Buddhism’s conceptual incursions (→). *This is precisely as Buddhism itself would have it*, for emptiness must remain empty, the self-void must remain void of self, dependent origination must remain dependently originated and originating. When so allowed, the Real is seen as the *cause*, in the last instance, *of Buddhism* (←). *Thusness, things as they are, emptiness, the Real*, etc., come first. The abiding human concern to know, say, *thusness*, causes the endless production of material we know as *Buddhism*. To have it otherwise, to reverse the direction of the arrow, is to confuse x-buddhism’s *representation* of *thusness* for generic *thusness*, and thereby to commit a parapraxis and to create an amphiboly. So, to answer our question—of what would nonresistance to the Real be productive; what would it mean to think *with* the Real or *from* the One?—we can say that, at a minimum, it would entail the genuinely, radically immanent “pragmatics” that Buddhism so confidently grants itself, as well as a human subject who is faithful to this occasion.

Before presenting Laruelle’s radical means to “thinking (from) the Real-one,” I think it will of help to offer a concrete instance of what is at stake, using an example that is universally dear to Buddhists.

Interlude: The immanence of an actual suffering

Can anyone with a beating heart take issue with Western Buddhism’s sole purpose for being: to lessen the pain of living? As we saw in Chapter 3, the technical term *dukkha* is understood to exceed the register of our concept “suffering.” That is, it ranges from that barely conscious, unnamable disquiet that many of us experience from time to time, through all-too-common varieties of disappointment, sadness, and anxiety, to debilitating physical suffering and agonizing emotional despair. Due to the subtly corroding effect of impermanence, it is present even in moments of pleasure. This pervasiveness is the reason that the identification of *dukkha* and its ending constitutes the beginning, middle,

and end of the Buddha's teaching. If *dukkha* permeates sentient existence, that teaching is permeated by the single flavor of liberation (*vimuttirasa*) from the mental conditions that engender that *dukkha*. As Jay Garfield, a Buddhist studies scholar trained in Western philosophy, notes, however, "Siddhartha Gautama's genius was not simply to see that we suffer, or that many of us are unhappy." Indeed, we don't need a Buddha for that. Together with the themes of falling in love and the inevitable loss of those same loved ones, the theme of pain is the impetus of art, poetry, music, and much more. If Freud is right in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, we have traded much of our vivifying, if violent, animal drive for the civilizing, if inhibiting, controls of culture. Freud is quick to add, of course, that the great paradox of civilization is the fact that in circumventing the miseries ensuing from our brute animality we have created new, equally unyielding forms of pain. Along with the arts, the disciplines of philosophy and religion are attempts to account for and expiate this pain. In this sense, Freud shared with the Buddha the fact that, as Garfield says of the latter,

His genius was instead to see that *dukkha* is the fundamental structure of our lives, what Heidegger would have called our *existentiale*. To be human is to live in *dukkha*.

This equation of *dukkha* and *existential* is interesting in several regards.¹⁵ Garfield is a leading proponent of cross-cultural studies. He is particularly prominent in the effort to establish parity between Buddhist philosophy and its Western counterpart. So, it is not surprising that he employs a behemoth of German thought to corroborate his point here. His aim, of course, is to underscore not only the inseparability of *dukkha* from life itself, but the universality of the very notion that lived existence (as opposed to object presence) possesses particular qualities as such. For, an *Existenzial* (henceforth, *existential*), as Garfield intimates, is not merely one of many possibilities present in human experience, such as, say, blueness *might be* the property of a coffee cup. An *existential* is rather a structuring element of worldly being per se. Heidegger, for instance, names as such elements the "mood" of fear or anxiety that helps to disclose the further *existentials* of being "thrown" into the world, of "finding" oneself in the world, of potential understanding, etc. As an *existential*, therefore, *dukkha* is not just either present or not present in the world, as the case may be, in the way that, say, a concrete slab either is or is not lying on the road. Rather, it is *constitutive* of lived being, in the way that concrete *in* the road *is* precisely *the road*. The genius of Heidegger, Freud, and the Buddha was thus to see that some *dukkha*-like quality not only permeates but structures human existence. The Buddha's

genius, Garfield tells us, further enabled him “to see that this is a *problem*, indeed *the* problem of human life.”

For *dukkha* is universally undesirable, or at least it is undesirable to most of us. And this means that our lives and the worlds we inhabit, which are the most desirable of all things, are in fact, as they are lived, undesirable. If our lives are to be worth living, and if they are to be sources of happiness and legitimate motivation, this puzzle demands solution. This is the absolute foundation of the Buddhist view of the nature of human life.¹⁶

The key term in Garfield’s statement is “solution.” Is it an exaggeration to claim that our entire history as *Homo sapiens* has been driven by a desire to *solve* the problem of the disease that flows through experience? From the constant deluge of labor-saving appliances and pleasure-giving gadgets, to the multibillion dollar effort to cure cancer, to totalitarian politics and perpetual warfare, we are apes with a flair for the fix, quick or otherwise. Thus, as anyone who has read them knows, each of our geniuses has an awful lot to say about, to put it in the Buddhist idiom, *pain and its ending*. We have already seen how Freud extends Schelling’s “veil of despondency that spreads itself over nature” to envelop the massive refuge of human security wishfully named “civilization.” Freud asks us to factor into our calculations for happiness the real possibility that there will always remain some “unconquerable” *thing* driving us inexorably toward pain, dissolution, and death. We have also seen that Heidegger wants to counter Cassirer’s hopeful affirmation of the human capacity to craft symbolic meaning by disclosing instead “the nothingness” of our existence. Being thus thrust back into this “hardness of fate,” we just might discover some capacity for “authentic activity.” Is that a desirable solution? What about Freud’s ultimate tradeoff of “hysterical misery” for “common unhappiness”? Does the notion of mental health as being “better armed against that unhappiness” offer anything worthy of the term “solution”? Is minimally neurotic unhappiness the “cathartic absolution” we so desire?¹⁷ We can throw into this melancholy mix Lacan’s unassuming contention that “An analysis should not be pushed too far. When the analysand feels that he is happy to be alive, that is enough.”¹⁸ If the typical reception of such “solutions” is any indication, the reader will feel these statements to be negative, pessimistic, somber, or perhaps darkly humorous, rather than modest and bracingly honest. Yet, given that we began with the shared premise that *dukkha*, like a Real or an *existential* or an *unconquerable thing*, is not only existentially pervasive but structurally determinate, we have to ask: what is the alternative? Yes, pain is a “puzzle [that] demands solution.” But is a “solution” worthy of the name even

possible? Garfield reminds us that the shared Buddhist position holds, among others, the following postulates:

The origin of *dukkha* is in primal confusion about the fundamental nature of reality, and so its cure is at bottom a reorientation towards ontology and an awakening (*bodhi*) to the actual nature of existence.

The elimination (*nirvāṇa*), or at least the substantial reduction of *dukkha* through such reorientation, is possible.¹⁹

Echoing the second and third noble truths respectively, these two postulates do offer a robust solution. Garfield's Western Buddhist "reduction" is less emphatic than the canonical "cessation" (*nirodha*) insists; but this is, I imagine, a result that will satisfy most Western seekers today. It certainly lacks the putative moroseness of Freud. But before we can certify it as a bona fide solution, we have to ask some questions: Is *dukkha*, then, not an *existential* after all? Can a "fundamental structure of our lives" really be *solved* by seeing things otherwise? Does such a "reorientation" entail, then, an idealism in which the "hardness of our fate" really is entirely compliant to the meaning-making "works of the spirit"? Or might such a reorientation be, yet again, a conceptual parapraxis, a misturning from the Real of pain as an existential structure of human experience to the Buddhist "rumor" of *dukkha* "transmitted by hearsay, imitation, specularity, and repetition"?²⁰ Might such a misturning give rise, yet again, to an amphiboly whereby the Buddhist concept *dukkha* is confused for the Real of human pain? A couple more questions: Is the pain that is "caused by a cognitive superimposition of permanence, independence and intrinsic nature on things that lack it" even the pain that we desire to relieve? Is the pain that "can be alleviated by, and only by, the cessation of this superimposition" even worthy of the name "pain"?²¹ Finally, might there then be a world (or should we say "a World") of difference between eliminating *dukkha* and eliminating human pain?

When Garfield hedges Buddhism's wager of *dukkha*'s nirvanic elimination by adding "or at least [its] substantial reduction," he is performing a quintessentially Western Buddhist move. Canonical Buddhism, indeed, traditional Buddhism in contemporary Asia and North America, ultimately pursues nothing less than the virtuosic cataclysm of a "total cure, opening to the unconditional beyond space and time."²² I thus see Garfield's hedge as an expression of an adamant, if respectful and reluctant, Western Buddhist *reorientation* in its own right. The reorientation is away from Buddhist legacies that entail overtly religious forms of transcendence and mysticism and toward forms of immanence and anthropotechnics. I say "overtly" because, as should be clear from my discussion

of the misturnings of meaning, conceptual amphibologies, and the role that The Dharma plays in decision, I think that the more “atheist” or “secular” or “naturalized” Western Buddhism becomes, the more it remains, in fact, deeply implicated in transcendence. Grumblings from certain outposts of Western Buddhism, online in particular, can be heard concerning the embarrassingly (to some) asocial and apolitical implications of this idealist inheritance of Western Buddhism. Or perhaps Garfield’s qualification is simply an effort to stem the flow of a genetic feature of Buddhism. For, this bifurcation is nothing new. The tension between an orientation toward otherworldly transcendence (gods, rebirth, heavens and hells, supermundane *nirvāṇa*, luminous consciousness, a cosmic Buddha, etc.) and an orientation toward this-worldly immanence (materialist psychological analysis of subjective experience, emphasis on empirical data, a human Buddha, etc.) is at least as old as the extant redactions of the Pali and Sanskrit canons. Obviously, I have no intention—or hope—of extracting this gene from the *corpus* of Western Buddhism. And why would I even want to? Throughout history, this genetic trait has spawned extraordinarily creative, if multiple and occasionally schizophrenic, tradition-personalities. When we consider the thought-world of Siddhārtha Gautama’s India, the gene was probably present at Buddhism’s inception. And as far as I can make out, from those earliest days to the present, its Janus-faced progeny appear completely normal to most Buddhists, Western or otherwise. As a passionate participant at The Great Feast of Knowledge, however, I have to mention two facts: In India as in the West the struggle between the royal agents of transcendence and the peasant partisans of immanence is as old as the hills. And never has an attempt at rapprochement been coherent.²³ It is, as the Buddha says of practice generally, a divided pathway, one leading to cultivation, and the other to decline.²⁴ Which is which, not even the brilliance of a Heidegger and a Cassirer can determine. For, as yet another luminary, Emmanuel Lévinas, who was present at the crisis-driven dispute at Davos said, “a young student could have had the impression that he was witness to the creation and the end of the world.”²⁵ Creation and end. Cultivation and decline. In the terms of this critique, though, the direction is clear. For, following Laruelle, it is rather a matter of sufficiency or insufficiency, decision or the “Undecided (of the) Real,”²⁶ the aristocratic or the democratic, a World or the black universe. Graphically, we can boil the choice down to

Buddhism → pain

or

Buddhism ←/ pain

To arrive at a good-faith, good-subject understanding of Buddhism's incursions into human pain ($\rightarrow$) we must, first of all, decide on *Buddhism*. That project would begin, of course, with our comprehension of the first term *dukkha*. In that sense, Garfield's statements are unimpeachable. For them to be so, however, we have to read his statements with the understanding of *dukkha* as a buddhistically sufficient first term for human pain. Read *dukkha*, in other words, as the overdetermining bearer of numerous Buddhist postulates *about* human pain, suffering, disease, etc.

The origin of *dukkha* is in primal confusion about the fundamental nature of reality, and so its cure is at bottom a reorientation towards ontology and an awakening (*bodhi*) to the actual nature of existence.

The elimination (*nirvāṇa*), or at least the substantial reduction of *dukkha* through such reorientation, is possible.

Graphically, what Garfield is saying, in the terms of our rereading, is this:

dukkha $\leftarrow$ x-buddhism $\leftarrow$ pain

The origin of the Buddhist concept *dukkha* lies in Buddhist thinkers' confusing the doctrinal concept of *dukkha* with the actual suffering experienced by sentient beings. Because this amphibology resolves into numerous Buddhist grammars of pain ($\rightarrow$ *dukkha*), we must add the variable *x*. The human Real of suffering itself is ultimately foreclosed (*/*) to the x-buddhist incursion. Being, as Garfield says, an *existential*, or, in his other words, a fundamental nature of reality, suffering has caused ($\leftarrow$) x-buddhism. That a reorientation toward the ontological fact of pain can eliminate or substantially reduce "*dukkha*" is not only possible, but probable. The reduction, of course concerns the force of a *representation* of pain, not pain itself. In doing so, the x-buddhist subject will be transformed into what Laruelle terms "the stranger subject." We will revisit this idea in the next chapter; but, by way of contrast, it might be useful to mention here that this type of subjectivity refers to "The identity of the Real [as] lived, experienced, consumed while remaining in itself without the need to alienate itself through representation."²⁷ Such a reorientation serves as the occasion of awakening. However, as with elimination/*nirvāṇa*, we would have to perform similar operations on the first term *bodhi* to arrive at a generic, rather than x-buddhist, "awakening."

What might a "stranger-subject" version of Garfield's rendition of the x-buddhist statement on suffering look like? It would have to be one performed, thought, and lived from this side ($\leftarrow$ /*/*) of the Real of pain. I know of no better candidate than, for my money, the greatest genius of them all, Emily Dickinson²⁸:

They say that “Time assuages”—
 Time never did assuage—
 An actual suffering strengthens
 As Sinews do, with age—
 Time is a Test of Trouble—
 But not a Remedy
 If such it prove, it prove too
 There was no Malady—

To understand how we might perform such a strange “reorientation towards ontology and an awakening to the actual nature of existence,” we now turn, first, to a reflection on the concept of immanence, and then to Laruelle’s move to “axiomatize” the Real.

Radical immanence

I imagine that for many readers the contour of radical immanence is slowly coming into view by now. Much of the work done in this critique has been precisely to expose operations in Buddhism that, in one moment, assert something like radical immanence and, in the next, compromise that principle. With concepts like *anātman*, *dukkha*, and *śūnyatā*, Buddhism does think the immanent Real. For instance, such terms allow it to articulate features of reality that our non-Buddhist symbolic system disavows since those features threaten our finely wrought constructions of order and meaning, not to mention the integrity and completeness of the symbolic system itself. Buddhism wants to convince us that it—as The Dharma—illuminates the way things are prior to or independent of language, representation, ideology, and so on, such that its articulations are necessary and sufficient explanations of our human situation. Thus, with concepts like *saṃsāra* and *pratīyasamutpāda*, Buddhism, furthermore, thinks that which in the history of ideas has been called “the One” and “the Real.” That is to say, Buddhism sets itself the task of classical metaphysics; namely, to identify the ultimate unity, and if possible, the unitary source, that underlies the seemingly infinite multiformity of phenomenal proliferation. Buddhism, in short, teaches us how it all hangs together. That is fine and understandable. If the history of ideas is any indication, discovering such a principle is a timeless human desire. It is the desire to know, to intimately embrace or even to be consumed by that which is *fundamentally* real. It is a desire born, perhaps, from the lived human

experience that involvement with the things of this world—objects, people, events—does not produce abiding pleasure, and, indeed, is too often the very source of pain. Indeed, Buddhism teaches us nothing if not that material, worldly entities and events are more painful because somehow less real than some prior, and ostensibly immanent, principle, such as emptiness, the unconditioned, primordial awareness, Buddha nature, *dharmadhatu*, innate goodness, and so on. That Western Buddhism both streamlines and doubles down on tradition's ancient task of articulating a version of radical immanence by extolling its ability to, in common contemporary terms, "reclaim" the "wonder" and "power" and "magic" and "miracle" of "the gift of the present moment," is not being contested here. Rather, using Laruelle's concept of decision, I have aimed to show that Buddhism's immanent Real-One, however precisely conceived, invariably metamorphoses into a transcendent representational-2/3. This alteration is the inevitable result of the scission required to maintain Buddhism's sufficiency. Buddhism establishes its dharmic foundation at the exorbitant cost of dividing the Real-One, that is to say its very principle of radical immanence, against itself.

Before turning directly to Laruelle's solution to this transcendentalizing function of buddhistic decision, it may be useful to step back and say more about what I mean generally by "immanence," as well as why it is being viewed here as necessarily a good. Rocco Gangle offers this helpful definition: "Immanence,' roughly, names any metaphysical position or method rejecting the notion that the ultimate structure of reality may be investigated independently of its real content." It is, moreover, a position that "disallows 'one-way' arrows from metaphysics to ontology, or from logical grammar to real semantics."²⁹ In the examples I have been providing, including the one in the previous section, what proves problematic in each case is precisely the allowance of this one-way arrow. The diagram *Buddhism*→*pain* means that our knowledge of the ontological Real of pain necessarily and sufficiently flows from the direction of the metaphysical system that articulates it. Historically, the fecund nature of this articulation is such that it has produced out of this (singular) "real semantics" numerous (plural) "logical grammars"; thus the diagram is properly given as *x-buddhism*→*dukkha*. It should be clear by now that a crucial move of this critique is to posit, following Laruelle, the foreclosed nature of "real semantics" (an actual suffering) to any "logical grammar" (*dukkha* as the articulation of this suffering). Now, the reader may have observed that we still have a "one-way arrow": ←/. It is, however, *from* the Real and *to* the form of thought that is subsequently engendered by that thought's very endeavor to think that Real. As should also be clear, a central thesis of this critique is that this reversal, from metaphysics to

ontology, in Gangle's language, produces a consequentially different relationship to the Real. This is a relationship, I have been arguing, to which Western Buddhism itself aspires, yet, trapped in decision, perpetually fails to realize. One of the immanent functions of "foreclosure" is to disable the circular and sufficient forces of decision, and thereby to cut off recourse to any "exterior." We saw that The Dharma is such an exterior since, as the transcendental vault to the "ultimate structure of reality," it reveals *how things are*, crucially including how they ultimately hang together. With the path to absolute transcendence thus cut off, all forms of thought are shown to be interior or immanent to human existence, even those that persist in thinking this immanence, this "real content," in terms of some transcendent differential. Some readers may have observed that "immanence" itself offers a view of *how things are* and, as such, is still indeed a "metaphysical position." As Gangle points out, however, "its claim about how things hang together is in part that they do not hang together in any way that is illuminated finally by differentiating between what is and how what is is structured."³⁰ Laruelle thus wants to speak of any "radical" concept as being *minimally* or *relatively* transcendental. So, "radical immanence" claims to be merely a "clone" of immanence rather than "absolute immanence" itself. Because we cannot circumvent the involvement of conceptualization, language, and representation, for instance, we must admit that in claiming "immanence," we are, to whatever limited degree, making a metaphysical move.³¹ This admission that "metaphysics" operates on our thinking of "ontology" and toward the Real at such an early moment of consideration does not diminish the value of immanence as a concept. On the contrary, this creeper-like quality of metaphysics, this relentless threat of alienating ideation, provides us with the most compelling reason we require for mobilizing the concept at all.

This last point raises the question: *Why is immanence necessarily a good?* This question has a corollary: *Why is transcendence necessarily a bad?* An obvious if perhaps too precious answer presents itself. Imagine a beast in the wild inquiring into the Being of the Life it is about to snuff out for supper. The only thing that matters to it is the rabbit scampering away. It would be ridiculous to raise the question of what grander principles ultimately undergird this event. Concepts like Being and Life are superfluous. There is only a living rabbit. And then, after the deed is done, there is neither Death nor non-Being; only a particular dead rabbit. Here, an immanent focus is a good because in orienting the beast to the actual features of its environment it facilitates survival. But such an answer is too easy. For, us *humans* in the wild, having caught and cooked and eaten the rabbit, do reflect on such first principles. This difference is captured by a cartoon

that shows beastly creatures emerging out of the ocean on to the land. The first creature is fish-like, followed by progressively evolved mammal-like ones, ending with a human male dressed for a day at the office. Above each creature is a thought bubble that says, “Eat. Survive. Reproduce.” The man, however, glances wistfully toward the heavens, wondering, “What’s it all about?” Cassirer names us humans *animal symbolicum*, the symbolizing animal, precisely because we have developed into this earthly creature whose most significant characteristic is the creation of meaning-bestowing, World-making, signifiers.³² Aided by reason, there is virtually no limit to our speculations. And so richly complex cultures arise with their myths, religions, philosophies, ad infinitum, explaining precisely what it’s all about. The Enlightenment founder of the very binary immanent/transcendent, Immanuel Kant, suggests what “bad” may be lurking herein.³³

We will call the principles whose application stays wholly and completely within the limits of possible experience *immanent*, but those that would fly beyond those boundaries *transcendent* principles ... [By the latter] I mean principles that actually incite us to tear down all those boundary posts and to lay claim to a wholly new territory that recognises no demarcations anywhere.³⁴

Such unchecked speculation morphs imperceptibly into a “transcendental illusion,” the human penchant for taking “a subjective necessity of a connection of our concepts ... for an objective necessity in the determination of things in themselves.”³⁵ Or, as Nietzsche put it, our propensity to fall for psychological trickery—we mistake our subjective wishes, interests, needs, etc., for the way things objectively are, or might be: unity, permanence, substance; primordial awareness, The Dharma, *dukkha*. Like Nietzsche, Kant recognizes the fetishistic power of such explanatory concepts when he points out that “Transcendental illusion ... does not cease even though it is uncovered and its nullity is clearly seen into by” a critique. What lies behind our intransigence is that the same mechanisms of thinking that produce valid reasoning (concepts that are “wholly and completely within the limits of possible experience”) also produce metaphysical fantasies (concepts “that would fly beyond those boundaries”). I imagine that many readers, nonetheless, want to argue for the whole or partial good of transcendent, metaphysical concepts: they give consolation in times of hardship; they offer hope in the face of cosmic meaninglessness; they soothe fears related to inevitable death; they help to create cohesive communities; we do not really know what lies beyond, anyway, and so on. To these kinds of responses, I would remind the reader that the purpose of critique is not to expose the ridiculousness of an idea so that we may be done with it once and

for all. The purpose is, rather, to expose how that idea functions in thought and in the formation of a subject within a World, and to make determinations about the desirability of the idea in light of its consequences. As this point reminds us, “immanence” itself is already veering, however reluctantly, toward metaphysics. The inescapable suction of the metaphysical vortex should be reason enough to see the good in the concept of immanence. In times of peril, say, during surgery or while flying through heavy turbulence, wouldn’t we all fervently hope that the surgeon’s or pilot’s attention remain “wholly and completely within the limits of possible experience”? Some readers may still disagree. But even the Pope says: “You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That’s how prayer works.”³⁶ So much for that which flies beyond the boundaries of the immanent world in times of real need.

The primacy of the immanent principle is, as I mentioned at the start of this section, a principle conceit of Western Buddhism. The representation of even the most traditional forms of Buddhism as, at heart, empirical, naturalistic, pragmatic, phenomenologically oriented, and so forth, is, indeed, a *definitive* feature of Western Buddhism. Western Buddhist teachers often illustrate the good of immanence with the famous parable of the arrow. In this parable, a man has been wounded by a poisoned arrow, shot at him by some unknown assailant. When the physician arrives to remove the arrow, and thus save his life, the man proves to be a recalcitrant metaphysician. He will not permit the arrow to be removed until he has attained knowledge of the transcendent organizing principles at work: Who shot the arrow? Was he low class? Middle class? What kind of bow did he use? Was it a longbow? A crossbow? Was the bowstring that was used to shoot the arrow made of swallowwort plant? From some sort of hemp? Were the feathers on the shaft from a vulture? A peacock? A stork? What about the sinew that was used to wrap the shaft? Was it from a cattle, water buffalo, deer, or monkey? And the arrow itself, was it razor-tipped, curved, tubular, calf-toothed, oleander? And so on and so forth.³⁷ This tedious and somewhat slapstick scene certainly drives home both the endlessness and absurdity of untimely speculation. By the time our injured metaphysician has gathered all the data required to reveal how it all hangs together, the arrow, smeared thick with poison, will have rendered moot his unitary model of reality, however accurate. Even though our victim is actually asking for empirically verifiable evidence, the parable simultaneously serves Western Buddhism’s denunciation of transcendence and metaphysical speculation and valorization of immanence and immediacy. As Stephen Batchelor tells us:

The purpose of the Buddha's teaching is not to resolve doubts about the nature of "reality" by providing answers to such conundrums [as who shot the poisoned arrow] but to offer practice that will remove the "arrow" of reactivity, thereby restoring practitioners' health and enabling them to flourish here on earth.³⁸

This critique has presented numerous arguments that contest the success of Western Buddhist "practice" for accomplishing such a result. Speaking of arrows, in fact, I have argued that x-buddhist auto-donation, auto-position, decision and so on (→) does precisely what Batchelor says it does not (resolve doubts and provide answers), and does not do precisely what he says it does (restore health and enable flourishing). I am not going to repeat those arguments here. My purpose in presenting the parable is to offer an example of the immanent principle's centrality to Western Buddhism itself. The question now is how to *preserve* that principle rather than to *determine* it. It should be clear to the reader by now that implicit in this question is my contention that Western Buddhism fails at the former and succeeds at the latter. It should also be clear that this critique views such success as Pyrrhic because it transforms Western Buddhism from a viable "science according to the Real" into an ideology *of* the Real. It is here that Laruelle's solution of an axiomatized immanence can assist Western Buddhism in realizing its cherished goal of a restorative human practice.

Axiomatic Real

A monk asked Yün-men, "What is Buddha?"

Yün-men said, "Dried shitstick."³⁹

This is a *kōan* from a thirteenth-century Japanese compilation usually translated into English as *The Gateless Gate*. The collection, like the *kōan* practice it promotes, was made popular in the West by a generation of Second World War-era teachers who were instrumental in fashioning American Zen, and by extension, Western Buddhism as a whole. I present it here in order to make a sequence of connected points. To begin, I would consider this "case" to be a fine example of the Buddhist concern for the Real. The monk is asking a question that, on the face of it, concerns the Real itself, signified by the first term "Buddha." Yet, the wise Yün-men recognizes that the question is so embedded in a system of knowledge that its answer has already been largely determined. In Buddhist parlance, the question constitutes a "thicket of views": it is bound up in an inextricable tangle of assumptions, doctrines, beliefs, desires, and so

on, such that no answer but the already predetermined one will suffice. And such an answer is, of course, no answer at all; it is merely a confirmation of the program to which the questioner has already subscribed. In Laruelen parlance, in invoking the particular first term “Buddha” and apparently confusing this representation for the Real itself, the questioner has already made a *decision*. It is a decision, moreover, that, Yün-men seems to suspect, requires a redoubled transcendental splitting; initially between “the monk” and “the Buddha,” and then between the world and the World. Can you conceive of a straighter path back to the immediacy of the questioner’s situation than “dried shitstick”? I like to think that the master would have been pleased with Artaud’s “Where there is a stink of shit/there is a smell of being.” In any case, we are not, of course, speaking here of shit. “Dried shitstick” itself is but a first term for the Real. Unlike “Buddha,” however, it is one that is difficult if not impossible to shoehorn into one of the countless “artificial forms and static norms” that people devise to subjugate others’ morality. In invoking it in response to the all-too Buddhist monk who stands before him, the master intends precisely to “wrest vital potentialities” from the confusion. In Laruelle’s own *kōan*-like utterance, we can say that Yün-men wants to enable the Real to be “given-without-giveness.” The monk’s “Buddha” establishes the buddhistic auto-position that in turn constitutes the “givenness” or determination of that which *must* remain precessional. Yün-men, that is, wants to insist that the “representation of the One,” for instance “Buddha,” “*follow from the One or be determined by it.*”⁴⁰ Certain operations on “Buddha” are required to correct the grammatical confusion that has enamored and captured our monk. “Dried shitstick” represents such an effort to, in our earlier terms, reverse the direction of the arrow. As always, a decisive question now arises: does tradition permit the reversal to hold? Unfortunately, Wu-men’s comment on this “case” contains the following prognostication:

It must be said of Yün-men that he was too poor to prepare even the plainest food and too busy to make a careful draft. Probably people will bring forth this dried shitstick to shore up the gate and prop [open] the door. The Buddha Dharma is thus sure to decay.⁴¹

It is clear enough from the *kōans* ascribed to Yün-men that he was a man of few words. Aitken relates the story that when, at the ceremony honoring his appointment as master of the monastery, Yün-men ascended the teacher’s high seat to deliver his inaugural address, and proceeded to utter barely more than, “Be careful!”⁴² As for the remainder of the commentary, Aitken himself exemplifies the manner in which Wu-men’s prophecy will be fulfilled. (And

how could he not? Aitken had obviously already quite robustly decided on Zen and Buddhism.) Conceding that Yün-men's speech must remain terse in order not to introduce extraneous and fetishizing representations ("Even the shit was dried up on his stick," he says!), Aitken adds the following (extraneous and fetishizing) remark: "Yet it [the dried shitstick] looms up and takes over, reaching to the Tushita heaven where Maitreya Buddha stirs in his deep samādhi. It won't be long now!"⁴³ Be careful, indeed! I trust that the reader is adept at recognizing the manner in which Aitken himself "bring[s] forth this dried shitstick to shore up the gate and prop [open] the door" of x-buddhist sufficiency, auto-donation, and all the rest. I only point out how ironic it is that Aitken reads Wu-men's remark as a warning to see through the "charisma" and "fakery" of "teachers who shout and wave their arms." By contrast to such snakeoil, "worthy teaching ... will cut off speculation, and it will be faithful to the one who is taught."⁴⁴ Of course, where I see Aitken and the Zen commentarial tradition vis-à-vis the Real as speculation soaked in *serpens oleum*, and as being quite *unfaithful* to their students, American Zen readers see enlightened expressions of awakened consciousness. I am fairly certain, too, that these same readers see my interpretation as the expression of a dense fool who is wholly incapable of passing through the gateless gate. Yet, surely we agree that:

In fermenting night soil
fat white maggots
steam with buddhahood.⁴⁵

Okay! But can we also agree to *Be careful!* with that "buddhahood"?

I would expect nothing less from a Western Buddhist, Zen or otherwise, than to counter my non-buddhist ruminations on Yün-men's case with grave criticism. After all, a critique like the present one is driven, and driven hard, by the very "discursive intellect" that the *kōan* is intended to "confound ... freezing it into a single ball of doubt, and finally to trigger an awakening (Japanese *satori*) to an ineffable state beyond all 'dualistic' thinking."⁴⁶ And with this point, we come to a pivotal aspect of radical immanence. Taking "state beyond all 'dualistic' thinking" to be but another first term for the Real (for, otherwise—well, see the section on "Wisdom" in Chapter 1), must we not admit that, contrary to being "ineffable," this "state" is, in Nick Srnicek's memorable phrase, "infinitely effable"? That is, based on the prodigious evidence of the history of ideas, the Real or the One "provides the basis for an infinite number of names for itself."⁴⁷ Paraphrasing the old educational film about Hinduism, we might as well answer

the question, *how many Ones are there*, in *kōan*-like fashion: “330 million.”⁴⁸ Wu-men, in other words, may well conclude our case with:

A flash of lightning,
sparks from flint;
if you blink your eyes,
it is already gone.

But if the history of commentarial literature, not to mention the interminable dilation of *dharma* talks, books, articles, and so on, that gush forth from x-buddhist communities are any indication, “it” will remain forever undetermined. That is not to say, of course, that it will remain *undecided*. To make a decision concerning the proper signification of “it” is precisely the act that constitutes and validates a given x-buddhism’s sufficiency. As Ray Brassier points out, however, such an act, being “inherently reflexive or specular,” means that the assemblage of x-buddhist communities that perform the act “remains a loose-knit grouping of interpretative strategies rather than a rigorous theoretical praxis.” It is worthwhile to quote Brassier at length on this point.

This fractional loop [of decision], this auto-positional and auto-donational structure, constitutes [x-buddhism’s] inherently reflexive or specular character. It guarantees that everything is potentially [buddhistizable], which is to say, possible grist for the decisional mill. Thus, if [buddhistizing] ... remains a loose-knit grouping of interpretative strategies rather than a rigorous theoretical praxis, it is because decisional specularity ensures the world remains [x-buddhism’s] mirror. [Buddhistizing] the world becomes a pretext for [x-buddhism’s] own interminable self-interpretation. And since interpretation is a function of talent rather than rigour, the plurality of mutually incompatible yet unfalsifiable interpretations merely perpetuates the uncircumscribable ubiquity of [x-buddhism’s] auto-encompassing specularity. Absolute specularity breeds infinite interpretation—such is the norm for the [x-buddhist] practice of thought.⁴⁹

What can be done? What might a step toward “a rigorous theoretical praxis” be? How might we stem the proliferation of x-buddhist interpretation of its self-articulated Real, and help to inaugurate a new norm for its practice of thought? As usual, Buddhism itself offers a potent solution. I imagine that most Western Buddhists have heard the story of Nan-in. A nineteenth-century Zen master, Nan-in, one day “received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen”:

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself.

“It is overfull. No more will go in!” “Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”⁵⁰

Whether full of water, full of shit (sticks), or full of the Real, emptying, Laruelle would concur, is a stellar idea. In yet another *kōanic* twist, however, it will be the quintessential “university professor” who schools the Zen master in the proper mode and manner of such emptying. So, to begin, Laruelle recommends application of his threefold “discovery,” the first facet of which is that “of the autonomy of the One as Real or of its essence of radical immanence.”⁵¹ As alluded to earlier, a first name for this Real-One is “given-without-giveness.” This construction, *x-without-xness* or *x-without-X*, occurs frequently in Laruelle. In brief, it indicates precisely the immanent phenomenality of some *x*. That is to say, it aims to abjure the usurpation of the transcendental signifier that inevitably lays claims to the *x*, and thereby to render the *x* “generic.” I was tacitly applying this principle earlier when I argued for *emptiness-without-Emptiness* against Buddhism’s *Emptiness*, where the capitalized *E* represents that which has been constituted through the decisional operation. As a more concrete example, consider *woman-without-womanness*. Cultures and ideologies, advertising agencies and masculine fantasies will endlessly construct notions of what properly constitutes *womanness* or *Woman*. Outside of the idealized Platonic form, this entity, *Woman*, we all know, never actually exists. Therefore, if we want to permit the concept at all, she must *be given*; “she” must be *presented* within some system of representation. Only *this woman* or *that woman*, only *a woman*, ever empirically exists. That is the reason we can say that *that woman* is *already* given, she is *present* prior to any transcendently pre- and overdetermined *givenness*. She is always and already, we could say, *woman-in-woman*. Similarly, Laruelle says of the One or the Real:

If the One is in-One, then it is so first by its essence and not as thinking the Real (from the One)—it is the suspension of every idealism at the heart even of thought. If there is a thought or a representation of the One, it can only follow from the One or be determined by it, but irreversibly.⁵²

If we want to allow that *dukkha*, to use another of our examples, serves as an adequate first term for the Real of “suffering” or “pain,” then pain must remain *in-pain*, and *dukkha* must be determined by *it* rather than by the system of *dukkha*-postulates determined by x-buddhism. That is, it, pain, is “given without an operation of assumed givenness ‘behind’ it, a background of the given.”⁵³

We have already seen that this manner of thinking disallows the reversal of the operation. It should be clear that to do so, to flip the arrow or to permit a two-way arrow, would be to rev once again the rockets of decision. It is in refraining from such an act that a new practice of x-buddhist thought might be born. This possibility, in fact, constitutes the second facet of Laruelle's discovery, namely, that the irreversibility of the operation lays bare the "causality of the Real-One as determination-in-the-last-instance."⁵⁴ While this operation enables a wholly positive, thus not merely critical or deconstructive, usage of x-buddhist material, it does so in a fashion that is so rigorous as to render that material buddhistically *strange*, to say the least. I will return to this point in Part 3. First, we will benefit from briefly considering the nature of this rigor in more detail.

Determination-in-the-last-instance "is not simply an immanent causality but radical immanence itself."⁵⁵ It may be useful to recall that "radical immanence" does *not* mean "reality." The word "reality" signifies the infinitely multifaceted and interminably mutable phantasmagoric Gestalts that we fashion from the Real. This statement, of course, falls far short of saying just what the One or the Real *is*. Historically, as many readers have already learned from x-buddhism, an aura of inscrutability surrounds "the Real." More than that even, there is a foreboding sense of a consequential miscalculation to be entailed if we say anything more about it. It is as if, for all but the most naïve, incautious, or committed among us, saying what "it is" puts us in jeopardy of dire profanation. Like the ancient Romans, for whom "*sacrum*" sufficed as the name of that which was infused with the awesome and precarious power of the gods, we halt at the first term. It is here, at the *profanum*, in front of the temple precinct, before the threshold of the gods' *terminus*, that we feel the least jeopardized. And yet, like the man from the country in Kafka's fable, we long to be granted entry into "the law," into *sacrum*. We long to possess the "universal object of desire," the "origin of reality" that "is" the *logos* of the One, the Real.⁵⁶ On the shadow side of this longing, of course, is the cool suspicion that it is yet another instance of what Lacan sees as a desire for imaginary plenitude. Among the crucial functions of the imaginary, recall, is to obscure the fact that our cherished symbolic system is incomplete, and, conversely, to enable us to complete that lack. The ensuing sense of plenitude permits the delusion that will avoid the "trauma" or "damage" that ensues from the Real's inevitable disruptions. Freud, too, would see the supposed subjective "source of the religious spirit" in the "oceanic feeling" as but an infantile regression into a primal sense of oneness (with the mother, with the world of objects, with the source of pleasure, etc.).⁵⁷ We could, of course, continue indefinitely with this exercise of enumerating notions of plenitude

and their refutations. And it is precisely this indeterminate “effing” of the Real that necessitates a concept of radical immanence. Laruelle would say that such an exercise ensues from the fact that “the One only acts in-the-last-instance, [meaning] that it does not exit itself, does not alienate itself in this act.” Since it does not exit itself, since it remains always One-*in-One* rather than One-in-the-infinite-ocean-of-Being as signified by our 330 million gods, a model or “clone” of the One is required in the form of a first term or a system of thought. It is required, I should quickly add, *not* for the sake of the One, but rather only “if it must have an act,” as, for instance, in the x-buddhist necessity to theorize pain as *dukkha*. Here we get our first glimpse of both the rigor and the strangeness of Laruelle’s method. Before I say more, it seems necessary to address questions that I imagine must be arising for many readers, questions along the lines of: Is Laruelle merely offering us yet another god in some sense? For, he himself warns that “There is always a God lying in ambush.”⁵⁸ Might Laruelle be blindly constructing his own imaginary plenitude, and asking us to share in his self-inflicted hallucination of the Real? Is Laruelle trying to delude us into believing that we can mystically circumvent language and ideology and enter into some sort of presymbolic *noumenon*? Does his “determination-in-the-last-instance” or “radical immanence” entail, like God, Being, or *śūnyatā*, a kind of idealist decision?

Critical questions like these are, of course, valuable. By way of addressing them, I first say that, necessary as they are, such questions miss a fundamental point. The function of “the Real” in Laruelle is purely *axiomatic*. Think of how a mathematical axiom functions to enable certain subsequent operations, and to do so regardless of the axiom’s relation to the (nonmathematical) world. I will return to this point in a moment. The point here is to address any misunderstanding that the theory exists to adjudicate between, much less make pronouncements concerning, this or that view of reality. Unlike Western Buddhism—the object of this study—non-philosophy or, as we will see, non-buddhism, has no interest in offering a specular view of *how things are*. Laruelle’s method is certainly not intended as an aid for grasping the Real. It is intended rather to help us grasp the *idealism* and the typically unacknowledged transcendence that, he claims, invariably constitutes ostensibly empirical or materialist philosophical, and I argue, buddhistic, forms of thought *concerning* the Real. The axiomatic Real-function is unconcerned with “being,” “meaning,” and even “reality” precisely because it serves to disable the decisional circuitry that is required in making (unscientific) pronouncements concerning such matters in the first place. So, initially at least, it is not a question of whether, say, *anātman* is correct or

incorrect, whether or not, that is, the concept accurately tracks some feature of reality. It is rather a matter of whether we are employing a *decisional* or an *axiomatic* method in evaluating “*anātman*.” Outside of a “first science,” “correct” and “incorrect” require decision. That makes them a move in a philosophical or an x-buddhist game. The antinomy correct/incorrect requires a decision both in the weak version of deciding for or against some theory of *x*, and in the strong version of necessarily grounding, whether explicitly or not, that decision in criteria that are not given *in* the *x*. Like Wu-men and presumably all the other thinkers we have encountered in this text so far, Laruelle is aiming for an extreme rigor of thought. But unlike them, apparently, he believes that this rigor, if it is to depotentialize circular decision, requires an axiomatic formulation. In short, his is a method for seeing (though *not* determining) what happens to some Real first term when this term is “foreclosed” to the interminable incursions, postulations, and pronouncements that *x*-thought labors to mix in. It certainly appears to be the case that, as Althusser says, “From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.”⁵⁹ This appears so because we seem to only ever have the competing cacophonies of occasional or regional knowledge systems among which we are bidden to decide. “Determination-in-the-last-instance,” to put it crudely, is a massive deaf and dumb stone positioned for those systems to crash against on their way to the Ideal. This effect, however, may be more incidental than it is essential. It is called “determination-in-the-last-instance,” after all, because it is that which “*despite everything, finally or really affects,*” ultimately *causes* or *determines*, every one of our regional systems of thought. Crucially, however, it does so not as an element within the Great Chain of Being, but as an “abstraction of the axiomatic type.”⁶⁰

So, what exactly does Laruelle mean by the rigor of an “axiomatic” method? It is now necessary to distinguish more emphatically between the largely psychoanalytical and philosophical notions of the Real that I have been employing in this work from the non-philosophical one. We have, for instance, enjoyed some good returns on Lacan’s coinage of the Real as that which pertains “in the name of the logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible,” or, on Eagleton’s definition of “the pure meta-sign or empty element in any semiotic system whose function is to indicate the truth that it cannot be totalised.” Freud, too, has offered value in his speaking of this evasive but determinate aspect of existence in terms of drives, the unconscious, the unconquerable “thing,” even the irreversible pain of social relations. We have also encountered philosophical notions of the Real as, for instance, a *noumenal* facet of existence presupposed, yet unaffected, by human symbolic systems, such

as language and ideology. Arguably, every one of the x-buddhist concepts the I have employed so far can be classed in one of these two categories: no-self and suffering-desire, for instance, as roughly psychoanalytic, emptiness; dependent origination and emptiness, as more or less philosophical. For Laruelle, *all* of these concepts are all-too philosophical. Similarly, we can say that they are all-too Buddhist. Every one of them represents not, as claimed, a rigorous practice of thought but rather, as Brassier said above, “grist for the decisional mill.” Each, that is, functions in an overall system that is “reflexive” (referring always back to x-buddhism itself), “specular” (gazes into the world and sees x-buddhism reflected back), and interpretive (perpetuating the replication of the properly subjugated x-buddhist practitioner). In Laruelle’s axiomatic notion, the One or the Real requires, and therefore receives, absolutely no further explication. So, in now moving away from earlier psychoanalytic-philosophical notions of the Real to a more generalized, all-encompassing notion, we appear to be closer to x-buddhist concepts such as *tathātā* (thusness), *yathābhutam* (things-as-they-are), *dharma* (totality of reality), *paramārthasatya* (ultimate truth), and *dharma* (natural order). In, however, “breeding infinite interpretation,” such notions ultimately constitute x-buddhist *mixtures* or overly determinate interventions into the Real. The non-buddhist solution to this confusion is axiomatization.

The identity of the Real, or of whatever first name we desire to give it—the One, Idea, nature, *sabba* (the All), The Dharma, *yathābhutam*—as axiomatic function not only requires no interpretation, it is impervious to it. Thought-systems like x-buddhism that articulate some such *Real* first name are performing a profoundly valuable service for all of us: they are identifying *that which is thought fit and worthy to be assumed* (this is the Latin definition of *axiōma*). They toil, often for centuries and across continents, to create material—concepts, words, texts, teachings, rituals, practices, human subjects, physical institutions—that present and represent elemental features of human existence. But this is not to say that their performances and their material necessarily effect their desired end of routing the infidel that is (false, deluded, samsaric) reality and thereby of inaugurating the reign of the (true, enlightened, nirvanic) Real. When Laruelle insists that the One “does not exit itself,” he means that it does not split off from itself (it is One-in-One) and wade into the ontological-phenomenal battlefield precisely wherein each thought-system parades, patrols, struggles for the high ground, becomes entrenched, and flies its flag. It does not do so because it already “is” that, *all* of that, all of the forms, the ideas, concepts, thought-systems, battlefields, in short, *material*, that were mentioned above and throughout this work, including the book in

your hands and the very thoughts and energetic labor that went into producing it and now go into reading it. The fact that we have for our consideration, say, The Dharma, even as a transcendental grounding or warrant for dependent origination—for even “transcendence” is, in the last instance, material and immanent—is evidence of the causal nature of radical immanence. “The Dharma,” that is to say, is precisely a material *clone* or model of that which Buddhism considers worthy to be assumed: *thusness, just that, things-as-they-are, the unconditioned, the deathless, a dried shitstick*. But to remain faithful to the Real which it names, the *identity* of this clone must not be fashioned into “an objective, a proclamation, an object.” In other words, it must remain a “manner or style of *thinking*,” and not an item to be collected and catalogued by epistemology.⁶¹ It must remain precisely an “abstraction of the axiomatic type.” As Duke physicist Robert Brown reminds us:

Axioms are *not* self-evident truths in any sort of rational system, they are *unprovable assumptions* whose truth or falsehood should always be mentally prefaced with an implicit “If we assume that ...” ... They are really just assertions or propositions to which we give a special primal status and exempt from the necessity of independent proof.⁶²

As yet more evidence of Buddhism’s profound proximity to a radically immanent form of thought, some compassionate teacher once tried to shore up against our inevitable objectification of *emptiness* as a thing to be known precisely by axiomatizing it. She did so by articulating the concept of *śūnyatāśūnyatā*, the *emptiness of emptiness*, or, in Laruelen terms, *emptiness-without-Emptiness*.⁶³ *Emptiness*. When we close it off to the incursions of the competing armies of meaning (*/*) and proceed not *toward* but *from* there (*←*), we have a good, solid x-buddhist axiom. So, we may now simply assume that *emptiness* is a concept—literally a construct, a mental *thing*, a *material* abstraction—that is worthy to serve as an instrument of our thought. *Emptiness* is a fit first name for the Real because it has no content. Emptiness is empty! *Pace* the x-buddhists, the Real of emptiness is indifferent to its revalorization as “a fullness of particular things” wherein “everything is realized as it is, in its total dynamic reality,” and thus harkening the good news of the “overcoming of an active nihilism.”⁶⁴ To be clear, as inventions crafted from the material concept “emptiness,” those kinds of statements are heartily welcome: we can think with them, initiate a life-form out of them, experience their force, and thereby evaluate their fitness. But as proclamations of correct and sufficient decisions concerning reality, they are not welcome. As such, they require that we decide either for them, and thereby

hallucinate a World on their terms, or against them, and join the immemorial brawl for epistemological domination. Eschewing either choice, we refuse *to go looking for our donkey riding on our donkey*. For, as Zen Master Foyan (1067–1120) sternly reminds us:

I tell you that you need not mount the donkey; you *are* the donkey! The whole world is the donkey; how can you mount it? If you mount it, you can be sure the sickness will not leave! If you don't mount it, the whole universe is wide open!⁶⁵

It may seem harmless that Master Foyan rewards such nonmounters with the epithet “wayfarer,” or sojourner on the path to enlightenment. But is it harmless? In order for such wisdom to auger a world devoid of doctrinal warfare we must introduce an additional *non-buddhist* condition here: If, however, in *not mounting* the donkey, you have performed a *Zen-not-mounting* or a *Buddhist-not-mounting*, then the whole universe once again shrivels up! What is at stake is nothing less than the introduction of “peace into thought by means of democracy.”⁶⁶ Not mounting the donkey of decision, we may begin the very task that Master Foyan ostensibly recommends, namely, “to think and create theory for human beings.”⁶⁷ We may finally “put the Real at the heart of the person [and] the person at the heart of the Real.”⁶⁸ To do so, however, is not to reinscribe onto “the person” yet another codex of subjectivity that some actual person may or may not finally realize. It is rather to free “the person” of any such compulsion. Laruelle’s “Theorem 000000: On the Suicide Disguised as Murder” offers an image whose violence provocatively posits the stakes involved, namely, a self-sacrifice perpetuated in the name of an apotheosis, of being raised up as some idealized *persona*—wayfarer, *bodhisattva*, *arhant*, mindful one, Western Buddhist, etc. We can paraphrase for our purposes what he writes in the experimental text “Theorems of the Good News”:

Buddhism has but one goal: to make the person believe that he must identify himself with Buddhism; to make the person assume this suicide, a suicide disguised as murder charged against the person.⁶⁹

Perhaps the most significant consequence of thinking from the axiomatic Real is that it inaugurates a new kind of relationship between, in our case, x-buddhism and the person who uses its materials. And what is that relationship? It is one in which the material is subservient to the person, and not the other way around. Really, this is always the case, and the only possible case. The “suicide” is a delusion. There is no transfer of identity. Or, this is a transfer, but it is an

illusion. As Laruelle says in “Theorem 0 or the Transcendental Theorem: On Nontransferable Identity” (in paraphrase):

Nothing can, except through illusion, substitute itself for the person and for his or her identity. And the person cannot, except through illusion, substitute herself for x-buddhism ... The person is an inalienable reality. There is no reversibility between the person and x-buddhism.

Another word for the nonalienated figure is “stranger subject,” to which we now turn.

The stranger subject

What makes the stranger subject so strange is that it indexes resistance to all ideological determinations of “the person.” If Master Foyan’s good student, the one who chooses not to mount the donkey, thereby attains the salutary status of “wayfarer,” the stranger subject, who similarly struggles with decision and the World, receives no such nomination. I spoke earlier of Laruelle’s use of violent language, and we saw it just now in “Theorems of the Good News”: victimhood, insurrection, suicide, murder. Why such language? For, look at how sincerely those compassionate regional knowledges—applied philosophy, positive psychology, x-buddhism—desire to mold us into exemplary beings. *A rational animal, a happy human, an enlightened Buddha*. Yet, surely anyone who has been party to the formative communities that foster such exemplars can attest to the violence, subtle or otherwise, done to their members in the name of the exalted ideal. For what is a thought-world devoid of its subject, wrenched, to whatever extent, into an actual human being?

Before further pursuing Laruelle’s idea of the stranger subject, it will be of help to create context by reflecting briefly on the Western Buddhist idea of the subject. The theme is obviously too complex to treat in depth here. Instead, I offer some broad remarks that I hope will stimulate the reader to further thought as we turn to the non-philosophical stranger subject. Consistent with what I have been arguing throughout this book, I understand Buddhism to be offering material for constructing a subject that would be faithful to the Real (to *thusness*, *emptiness*, *the all*, *no-self*, *things as they are*, and so on) but for the eventual and inevitable turn required by x-buddhist sufficiency. As is often the case with Buddhism, a certain binary appears to be operating here. In some instances, the practitioner is understood to be *shaped* into a particular (Buddhist) subject.

He may show up at the *sangha* as a reprobate good-for-nothing, but through sustained cultivation of particular qualities, such as concentration, compassion, equanimity, lovingkindness, proper speech, and so forth, he may attain to a kind of Buddhist perfection. An opposing view disparages this model of cultivation. It does so because it adamantly dismisses the very premise on which it is founded, namely, the conditionality, and hence constructability, of “Buddhahood.” In this view, our ne’er do-well practitioner has “cultivated” nothing whatsoever; he has simply become what he has always been but failed to realize: an awakened being, a Buddha. We find this latter position in, for instance, the *kōanic* “How can you hope to polish a tile to make it into a mirror?” and other such views derived from the theory that all sentient beings *already* possess an indwelling “Buddha matrix” (*tathāgatagarbha*). The former position is reflected in, for example, the Dalai Lama’s Ge-luk view that awakening is “not a given that awaits our discovery, but something that must be created through discursive (textual) and nondiscursive practices.”⁷⁰ We see this basic binary throughout Buddhism’s history. It is at work to varying degrees in, for instance, the ancient debates on practice between “village dwelling” and “forest dwelling” practitioners, medieval ones between “gradualists” and “suddenists,” and modern ones between what I’ll call diurnal destressers and enlightenment virtuosos. Perhaps this bifurcation is yet another genetic inheritance of Buddhism. For we find both views represented in the Pali canon. The Buddha says there, for example, “I do not say, monks, that the attainment of wisdom happens all at once. Rather, the attainment of wisdom comes after gradual training, gradual action, gradual practice.”⁷¹ However, he also says that, “This mind, monks, is luminous but is adulterated by adventitious defilements.”⁷² Again, the former in each case suggests a “materialist” subject, one that is initially absent then *created* via a sustained and disciplined regimen while the latter suggests an “idealist” one that is already present then *discovered* as soon as the practitioner but “understands this [indwelling luminous mind] as it really is.”⁷³

I think it is safe to say that a survey of contemporary Western Buddhist teachers will prove this two-fold heuristic roughly reliable. One caveat that I would make to that claim is that the distinction is largely rhetorical. That is, I would submit that the typical contemporary Western Buddhist teacher fails to understand this difference that has animated so much intra-Buddhist debate, between, namely, a discursive and an essentialized subject. Not only do contemporary Western Buddhist teachers woefully undertheorize subjectivity, but to the extent that they broach the topic at all they seem simply to assume the Enlightenment, Romantic, and Protestant subject discussed in the Introduction.

Many readers surely object to my characterization of an “essentialized” Western Buddhist subject. If any topic is anathema in well-instructed Buddhist company, it is “essence.” That news may come as a surprise to the student of Buddhism, who commonly comes across terms like “true self,” “Buddha nature,” “original goodness,” “primordial consciousness,” and so on. I would refer those rightfully perplexed students to Tom Pepper’s lucidly argued “Taking Anatman Full Strength and Śāntideva’s Ethics of Truth.”⁷⁴ Because it so deftly articulates the prevailing view of Western Buddhist subjectivity, as well as the inter-Buddhist contradictions and, hence, missed opportunities, that that view entails, it will be of use to present a few assertions from this article. Pepper writes, “I take the term *atman* to refer to the concept, common in the time of the historical Buddha, of a world-transcendent, essential, and unchanging life-force, consciousness, or soul.” The Buddha, of course, challenged this *atman* view with his concept of no-, not-, non-, *an-atman*.

The teaching of *anatman*, then, can be understood as an assertion that there is no eternal and unchanging consciousness, life force, or soul, singular or plural, nothing which can escape this dependently arisen world and continue on in eternal bliss. Rather, the only kind of self we have is a dependently arisen self, completely caused by the conditions of its existence. Full-strength *anatman*, then, does not say that we do not have a “self,” that the self is mere illusion, or that it is non-existent. Rather, we do have a self, it is real, and has real causal powers, but it is impermanent, constructed by the conditions of its existence, can be changed, will come to an end, and is completely non-dualistic, radically immanent to the material world.

As I will show in a moment, Laruelle’s stranger subject is coming into view here. The question would be, then, whether x-buddhists themselves theorize such a “full-strength *anatman*,” or whether they water it down with splashes of sufficiency and dollops of decision. Pepper offers this succinct account of Western Buddhism’s current state of affairs concerning this matter, whereby:

Everybody seems to want to assert fidelity to this central Buddhist teaching, but nobody is quite as eager to embrace all the implications . . . It is too troubling, for a multitude of reasons, to accept the possibility that the early Buddhists really meant that there is no *atman* at all, of any kind. So, we get a host of watered-down, more palatable versions of *anatman*, which turn out always to sneak some kind of *atman* in under another name. The implication of this, I will argue, is the complete elimination of any possibility that Buddhist thought and practice could function to decrease suffering in the world, the complete destruction of the *bodhisattva* path.

This compelling conclusion resonates with my own contention, stated at the very outset of this book and repeated throughout. I restate that contention here: Buddhism offers us valuable resources, both concepts and practices, for consequential reformations of self and society in the contemporary West. *However*, in light of both the past and the present, we are compelled to draw the conclusion that the term “Buddhism” indexes a deep human ambivalence toward unleashing the full force of its liberating thought. Although Pepper goes on to discuss “the *bodhisattva* path” in the specific terms laid down by Śāntideva (fl. eighth century), we can take his warning about its destruction as a generic claim concerning Western Buddhism’s unwitting function as an ally of the current, and quite possibly doomed, socioeconomic status quo. The negative side of this function is the inability of Western Buddhism to aid us in our current condition of being “addicted to suffering, to stagnation, and to the rapid destruction of the very conditions of our existence.” Again, although I say “Western Buddhism,” that is just shorthand for the many *actual people* who labor to fashion and perpetuate its particular World, a World in which neither “a dose of full-strength *anatman*” nor its faithful subject appears to be a part of the solution.

In the Pali canon, the Buddha uses two interesting terms for the subject. Again, we see a binary. The first term is “uninstructed worldling” (*assutavā puthujjana*). Although this is a technical term with a copious descriptive apparatus, an uninstructed worldling is basically someone who responds to pain, life’s vicissitudes, and general change the way I assume everyone reading this book does: he or she is averse to the first, affected by the second, and concerned with the third. This figure is contrasted with another subject: “the instructed noble disciple” (*sutavā ariyasāvaka*). Unlike the all-too-human uninstructed worldling, this subject “endures [pain] patiently, without sorrow, resentment, or distress”; takes life’s vicissitudes (gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain) with perfect equanimity; and faces inevitable change with imperturbability.⁷⁵ The uninstructed worldling, in other words, is a subject for *the world* while the noble disciple can only realistically be one for *a World*. Well-instructed readers surely take exception to my admittedly uninstructed opinion that the latter is a fantastical, unattainable figure, and, even if attainable, wholly undesirable. Now, we may “only” be dealing here with *subjects*, with discursive conceptions of what an actual person *should or might* be. But considering the lived effect of such subject discourses on actual people, Laruelle’s insistence that the man or woman is an “inalienable reality,” an “irreversible identity,” whose submission to such notions constitutes a figurative “suicide disguised as murder charged against the person,” begins to sound like the more liberating discourse

of the two. If nothing else, it valorizes a degree of performative honesty found lacking in idealizing (in both senses) subject discourses like Western Buddhism. In some cases, this performative impossibility *might be* understood as an integral aspect of the very practice. It is always hard to be sure. What, for example, would a *literal* effort to fulfill the *bodhisattva's* vow to save all sentient beings entail? Yet, Dainin Katagiri, an influential Zen teacher in the United States, insists in true Wisdom fashion that, yes, “to the intellect it seems impossible”:

But actually it is possible. When we say the vows in English, we say “I vow.” But bodhisattvas don’t assert the “I.” The bodhisattva’s life is completely without subject or object. This is full concentration. Thus, a bodhisattva is not a bodhisattva. This bodhisattva is really, fully alive.⁷⁶

Typically, though, the performative impossibility is unacknowledged. I close these remarks about the Western Buddhist subject with an example that is quite possibly currently the most widely circulated single sentence on the topic: “Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, to things as they are.”⁷⁷ The “instructed” Mindfulness subject strives to embody such a condition, and, non-judgmentalism notwithstanding, actual practitioners really believe that they do and I, for example, don’t (otherwise, would I be questioning its viability?). Yet, if we disallow the exception that Wisdom grants such statements, how do we even begin to sort out the “thicket of views” here—the unstated assumptions about consciousness and cognition, about awareness, agency, time, the faculty of judgement, about their being a definitive “way” that things are, and much more? Even if we could do so, we are immediately met with the additional claim that “[mindfulness] is a way of shifting from *doing* to *being* so that we take in all the information that an experience offers us before we act.” Like the Buddha’s impervious, imperturbable, noble disciple, even if it were possible, would such a post-human calculating machine be desirable? Wisdom, of course, explains it all. But does it do so without lapsing into vacuous platitudes, logical absurdities, and remedial instructions? Yes, counters the subjugated practitioner. To which I then ask, okay, but is that assertion not just an admission that we are dealing here with an ideologically driven *rhetorical* performance rather than a generic “whole other way of living our lives”?⁷⁸ To repeat a familiar pattern of this book, I want to quickly add that the existence of an ideologically driven rhetorical performance is certainly *not* a target of criticism. The critical gears start cranking when an amphibology, a confusion-causing ambiguity, is detected in the “syntax” of the conceptual structure. A less gentle way of saying the same

thing is that the critique-worthy issue arises when we become suspicious about whether *sensei* does in fact do what he says and say what he does. Laruelle views this performative inconsistency as a defining characteristic of those who traffic in sufficient thought-systems.

The philosopher, legislating for reason, the life of the mind or social life, makes an exception even of the fact that he does not do what he says or does not say what he does, but, speaking the law, he makes an exception and enjoys the privilege of speaking about it and imposing it with his authority. I speak the truth, says the liar; I speak democracy, says the anti-democrat: this is the paradox of the philosopher as thinker of the Whole who is never short of expedients for presenting the paradox as if it were acceptable.⁷⁹

You might think that the sickening spectacle of enlightened sexual predators, spiritual snake oil salespersons, and crazy wisdom creeps among the propounders of The Dharma would be more than enough to detect the machinations permitted by the “expedients” of Wisdom. But obviously it is not. Yet how much more difficult to discern the exceptionalism of which Laruelle speaks, masked as it typically is by kind wise eyes and a compassionate, if faintly self-righteous, affect. Consideration of the stranger should prove rewarding to anyone desiring a conception of a subject faithful to the full implications of Western Buddhism’s discerning thought. It should be obvious from the preceding remarks that one of those implications is *not* that the stranger, like some sort of secular mystic, has seen the face of the inscrutable Real and thereby attained stranger enlightenment. The Real, recall, entails a “unilateral causality,” such that:

stranger $\leftarrow$ Real

The Real determines the stranger subject but the stranger subject does not determine the Real. “The stranger subject”—whether as concept, utterance, imagined archetype, or embodied agent—is yet another material derived *from* the Real. The same, of course, can be said of the Western Buddhist subject. So, what is the difference? The Western Buddhist subject is determined by the One *in the last instance* only. But the merits of that proposition become clear only after doing a considerable amount of work. This critique is an example of the required work. We have, for instance, seen the ways in which the Western Buddhist subject is primarily constituted through its decision to stand within the World as seen through the prism of Buddhism. We have seen how Western Buddhism gazes into the Real, projects into it its elaborate determinations, desires, and goals, and sees this complex mixture reflected back to it, not, of course, as the Real,

but as *paramārthasatya*/ultimate truth, *tathātā*/thusness, *śūnyatā*/emptiness, *pratīyasamutpāda*/dependent origination, *rigpa*/primordial consciousness, the mindful present moment, The Dharma, and so on. The Western Buddhist subject stance thus entails a form of thought and life that is adequate to the organon of *x-buddhism*. None of this describes the stranger. This stranger is constituted by the fact that it attends outwardly, toward the countless material cloned from the One, including the material labeled “Western Buddhism.” This subject, contrary to deciding on the sufficiency of this material, receives the material, engages with it, grapples with it, fights against it, appropriates elements of it, struggles further with it, creatively appropriates it some more, and maybe in the end fashions a form of life from it. The subject’s very knowledge that this is a necessary procedure for avoiding capture by sufficient x-systems is precisely that which makes possible its thought and action against the pretensions of a World and in accordance with the One.

This form of “stranger” thought, in fact, constitutes Laruelle’s third “discovery,” namely, the “force (of) thought.” As the resonance with Marx’s “labor power” (*Arbeitskraft*; typically translated into French as *force de travail*) indicates, the force (of) thought is a “capacity, or power of the living individual.” Marx continues:

Labor-power, however, becomes a reality only by its exercise; it sets itself in action only by working. But thereby a definite quantity of human muscle, nerve, brain, etc., is wasted [or exhausted, spent: *verausgabt*], and these required to be restored ... The value of labor-power resolves itself into the value of a definite quantity of the means of subsistence. It therefore varies with the value of these means or with the quantity of labor requisite for their production.⁸⁰

Similarly, the force (of) thought must be exercised if it is to constitute a “drive” with pragmatic force in the world.⁸¹ And like the static potentiality of labor power it must be *continually* enacted in order to resolve this dismantling into adequate use-value. Significantly, though, unlike for labor-power, the resolution of the force (of) thought into use-value does not entail the subject’s alienation. In fact, it entails alienation *from the alienating structure itself* (hence, “the stranger subject”), that is to say, in our case, from the system of production and exchange called x-buddhism. The value derived from this estrangement is that the force (of) thought “dismantles fetishism of thought-representation” and thus becomes “adequate to the radical autonomy of the One.”⁸² I must quickly add that this should not be understood to mean that the stranger subject is a thinking ego, one that internally conceptualizes, intuitu, understands, reasons, or otherwise

thinks some content that effectively “reifies or thingifies [the One] into an ontic element or into a transcendental imagination.”⁸³ The stranger’s force (of) thought is “adequate” to the Real because it constitutes a “clone” of the Real, “rather than its production or reproduction into some material form proper to it.”⁸⁴ A clone, recall, is identical to but not the same as its original. In other words, $1 + 1 = 1$: 1 (the Real) + 1 (the stranger) = 1 (vision-in-One), and *not* 2 or the One-in-a-Second or the One-in-Another.⁸⁵ If this sounds obtuse or far-fetched, we can once again consider how the object of this critique approaches very near this equation. The Japanese Zen teacher Musō (1275–1351), as an illustration, is posed the question:

It is said that there are some people who practice *kufū* in all things and others who do everything with *kufū*. What is the difference between the two?

The term *kufū* (Chinese, *kung-fu*) is a first name for the Real. To practice *kufū* properly, therefore, is to live in accordance with the Real. This fact reveals the enormity at stake in the question. The German Buddhologist Heinrich Dumoulin translates this idea into Buddhist language: “In everything they do, disciples of the Way should be totally devoted to the Dharma—they should practice *kufū*.” Recalling Kafka’s guardian of the law, Dumoulin has another master tell us that there is “no separation between the law of the Buddha and the law of the world.” So how else can Musō answer the question than to say that whether eating, sleeping, reciting *sūtras*, or shitting, subjects of the Way practice *kufū*? As to the question of the difference between the two: “*there is no difference* between ‘within all things’ and ‘within *kufū*.’” $1 + 1 = 1$.⁸⁶

The Dharma subject is similar to the stranger subject in another way. For the former, too, something like the force (of) thought is deemed necessary. Indeed, Western Buddhism is nothing if not a Mayday concerning the pernicious fetishism of thought: “Thought is samsara. Being free of thought is liberation. When we are free of thinking, we are free of thought.”⁸⁷ More damningly, in thinking that which is foreclosed to it, namely, *thusness*, *emptiness*, *the Way*, and so on, thought obscures the very truth it both seeks and is: “Before ideation, before the mind begins to construct [representations and images], the mind touches the ultimate dimension, the realm of suchness.”⁸⁸ Therefore, what conclusion can we rationally draw but: “if you seek truth, you should value silent awareness and ... consider it more important than any thought”?⁸⁹ Both subjects, the stranger and the x-buddhist, are being alerted to the alienating effect of mistaking a representation of the Real for the Real itself. Both subjects are being told that the exorbitant cost of this alienation is the very world in

which they live. Both subjects are being taught that it is precisely *within* the indetermination that constitutes representational thought that their respective subjectivities are to be found. Both subjects are being implored to struggle against the World and to resist the hallucination conjured by its thought. Finally, both subjects are being advised to “experience” the intimate, immanently “lived” or performed thought that follows immediately from the Real. So, again, the crucial question arises: what is the difference? And the answer is the same I have offered throughout this book. Whereas the x-buddhist is corralled *in-Buddhism*, the stranger remains *in-One*. That is, in the quotes above, x-buddhism continues to harass us. It clears the way of delusional representations only to construct a new way, an x-buddhist way. And it must! That is precisely what sufficient thought-systems do. Once again, the critical issue is that it does so in a manner that constitutes an amphiboly, a confusion engendered by its mistaken equation of *its* representations *for* the Real. It may be true that its representations—its texts, concepts, models, language—are, as D. T. Suzuki says, comprised of “mere waste paper whose utility consist in wiping off the dirt of the intellect”; but this towering figure of Western Buddhism errs profoundly when he adds, “and nothing more.”⁹⁰ As an example of what this decisive “more” consists in, we can look at the fuller context of one of the above quotes. Bear in mind that the “inner commentary/speech” is synonymous with “thought” and “thinking.”

Sometimes we assume it is through the inner commentary that we know the world. Actually, that inner speech does not know the world at all. It is the inner speech that spins the delusions that cause suffering. Inner speech causes us to be angry with our enemies and to form dangerous attachments to our loved ones. Inner speech causes all of life’s problems. It constructs fear and guilt, anxiety and depression. It builds these illusions as deftly as the skilful actor manipulates the audience to create terror or tears. So if you seek truth, you should value silent awareness and, when meditating, consider it more important than any thought.

This paragraph is a directory of subject determinations. It is rife with tacit assumptions about the subject, with passive-aggressive demands, hidden values and prejudices, gas-lighting manipulations, and quite a lot more. In short, the passage illustrates the fact that if x-buddhism enlightens us as to the actual indetermination burrowed within representational thought, such that its subject is grounded in emptiness, no-self, thusness, etc., things quickly turn dark with its extreme overdeterminations of the same. On this point alone we can turn toward the stranger subject and discern the decisive difference. For, if the Real is “foreclosed” to philosophical, psychological, x-buddhist or any other authority,

then *it must remain foreclosed*. If “before the mind begins to construct, [it] touches the ultimate dimension,” then the system of thought that teaches us this fact must at all costs avoid propagating constructions *about* that dimension. It is for this reason that Laruelle says that the force (of) thought is “the first possible experience of thought—after the vision-in-One, which is not itself a thought.”⁹¹ Such x-buddhist constructions amount to thinking the in-One (the ultimate dimension, suchness, in x-buddhist language) as “the first possible experience of thought,” and all additional thoughts as stemming from that experience. Where the x-buddhist subject proceeds under the dependence of the sufficient system of determination known as The Dharma, the stranger subject proceeds “Under the dependence of the vision-in-One in-the-last-instance,” on, that is, the basis of its specific form of practice such that “it transforms the material of [buddhistic] statements and particularly the datum of the images of [its] thought” so as to render them coterminous with the science-thought discussed earlier.⁹²

I hope to have made it clear, or at least plausible, that the Western Buddhist subject position entails a practice of thought that is adequate to the organon of *x-buddhism*. As with Western Buddhism and indeed all forms of thought, the force (of) thought, too, is an organon. But it is an organon that, as we have already seen, “works through hypothesis or axiomatic ‘real’ decision,” rather than through the kind of unitary and sufficient decision that explains the Western Buddhist stance. This point touches yet again on a central feature of my critique, and, as a way of rousing the spirit of Part Three, it bears repeating. The problematic of this critique is not to intervene in the World of Buddhism in order to correct its errors and render it palatable to us all-too-sophisticated twenty-first century secularists. As I suggested in the very first sentence of this book, the problematic of this critique is driven by the question *what are we to make of Western Buddhism?* As Laruelle claims for non-philosophy, I am claiming for a speculative non-buddhism that the problem is how to *use* it, how to make something from it and *for the stranger*.

The problem is how to use philosophy so as to effect a real transformation of the subject in such a way as to allow it to break the spell of its bewitchment by the world and enable it to constitute itself through a certain struggle with the latter. The goal is not to effect a specular doubling or duplication of the world, thereby reinforcing its grip, but to elaborate a new order, that of the radical subjectivity of the Stranger as subject who is in-struggle by definition.⁹³

This is a remarkably positive statement coming from Laruelle. It nearly resembles a non-philosophical affirmation. It almost constitutes the lineaments of a

concrete program of action. It seems to suggest that practice has consequences beyond theory, beyond, that is, practice *as* theoretical reflection and theoretical reflection *as* practice. We will turn more directly to this issue in Part 3. What I want to suggest is that my explicit hedging on the stranger's positivity here is absolutely necessary. For, whatever else the stranger subject might be, it is barred from the endless determinations and representations that mark discourses like x-buddhism. Admittedly, this foreclosure produces a subject that sounds somewhat machinic, somewhat generic and anonymous. But I would argue that *anātman* does so as well. Indeed, that very fact is what makes the Buddhist term a viable first name for the Real. For, if it is to mean anything at all, the "lack of inherent existence" that characterizes the subject must remain faithful to that lack. Eschewing the Western Buddhist "rumor" concerning *anātman*, that rumor "which is transmitted by hearsay, imitation, specularity, and repetition," the concept "stranger" might just be tonic for stimulating a truly void subject, one that "does not use [x-buddhism] as if it were already constituted, [but] *is* that use."⁹⁴ Being, or better, performing, that use, however, does not entail that the subject *identify* with the Buddhist material. Its identity is irrevocably bound to that of the very Real that agitates this entire magnificent display and awesome labor to begin with.